

RETHINKING ELECTORAL POLITICS

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Mainstream political parties in Pakistan operate as fiefdoms, with no internal transparency in terms of democratic norms, hierarchical progression, recruitment processes, funding strategies, or even policy manifestoes. In many ways, electoral contestation takes the form of warring cliques: closed circuit groupings of elites strategically manoeuvring through the terrain of ‘electables’, corporate seths, and the security apparatus to win favour and form a government to primarily serve their interests and desires. Ordinary citizens are, for all intents and purposes, treated as passive spectators in the ordeal, largely perceived as props for publicity content seeking to create the impression of a mandate. Is this democracy?

With student unions banned across most of the country, trade unions and farmers’ associations constantly facing intimidation and harassment by authorities in their respective domains and devolved local government systems entirely dysfunctional, it is no wonder politics in Pakistan continues to be dominated by individuals posturing as messiahs, families operating as royalty and institutions assuming extra-legal status. Unions and associations function across the globe as nurseries for home-grown leaders who are in the political sphere to serve the public interest rather than amass personal fortunes. Participants in these collectives eventually go on to join a party they are ideologically aligned with: one that has already established a presence for itself. In this way, the process of political contestation retains a sense of dynamism — with a steady stream of ‘inputs’ for the playing field. Individual personalities cannot take their positions for granted, and are compelled to generate new ideas, policy orientations and sociocultural appeals to remain competitive in terms of both their public appeal as well as standing within their own party.

It is Pakistan’s great misfortune that its (bigger) political parties contain few, if any, internally democratic process

as. There is hardly any evidence of them having conducted fair, transparent and competitive elections for key positions over the past few decades. The responsibility for ensuring this should ideally fall within the Election Commission of Pakistan’s domain, as an independent body that organises polling, verifies the identities of those present, distributes voting cards, collates results and publishes a publicly available annual report on its website. This will function to ensure that merit — rather than patronage/favouritism — determines an individual’s ability to climb organisational ranks within parties. In turn, members will naturally reorient their approach to enhancing their expertise — in both technical and governance related matters — and adopting a collaborative spirit that uplifts their fellows and fosters a sense of trust with them. Human resource management will also transform over time, prioritising talent and innovation over capital and ‘connections’. Over time, the influence of past glories linked to familial ties will be curtailed and short-term, opportunistic players will be prevented from making unjustified strides.

Internal democratic norms will also introduce a sense of ideational vibrancy within political parties. As things stand, party members present one homogenous viewpoint to the public, the deviation from which is generally met with hostility and disapproval from leadership. With a culture of frequent intraparty elections, however, party members will begin to challenge one another in a healthy manner on topics such as policy directions in various social and economic sectors, welfare of people vs. profits of corporations, security and foreign policy orientations, relations with the diaspora community, institutional reform for governance, etc. These engagements will foster a culture of debate and exchange within parties, prompting members to continually refine their views and engage with the academic community (whether think tanks or educational

institutes) to introduce depth and validity to their claims. The final manifestoes that parties present to the public during election campaigns, therefore, will be of a much higher standard than in bygone years — the claims in which have seemed to lack even a rudimentary level understanding of Pakistan's polity.

Second, the question of electables. Landed elites play a central role in the process of political contestation in Pakistan, with parties strategically granting them tickets for electoral cycles in exchange for the guarantee of vote banks in their respective constituencies. Landlords achieve this via a combination of coercion, monetary incentives and trivial 'development' work that collectively convinces their target audiences to vote for a particular candidate. In order to redress this, the ECP must establish strict conditions on the awarding of tickets. For instance, parties may only be allowed to grant these to their own registered members: those who have served (and cast a vote in intraparty elections) for a minimum of two years in the lead-up to a particular electoral cycle. This will lead to the tapering off of land relations as a pivotal determinant of electoral outcomes, creating the incentive for parties to opt for long-term partnerships based on shared values and principles rather than clientelistic ones serving immediate requirements — mostly of the establishment.

Finally, political financing. The ECP must do everything under its control to trigger a move away from big donors with vested interests to grassroots crowdfunding strategies. Political parties must ultimately represent the interests of the ordinary citizen rather than landlords, real estate mafias, big corporations, rent-seeking industrialists, international financial institutions and the security apparatus — all of whom currently play a key role in generating/directing funds for the logistics of events during campaigns, media coverage of certain figureheads, day-to-day administrative/managerial tasks, recruitment and outreach, and more. All this reduces political parties to mere mouthpieces of those with prior access to financial capital, and patrons naturally expect their preferred party to 'return the favour' by passing policies that support their interests once in power. This can be curtailed by establishing a requirement to demonstrate a certain minimum donation (say Rs5000) from a minimum number of people (say 5% of the total population of a constituency) during a stipulated time period prior to elections. This will naturally create the incentive for parties to reorient their approach towards non-propertied classes and truly win their favour — particularly in rural communities where most party strongholds are entirely reliant on the coercion of local power brokers. Political parties are a crucial part of the democratic process — and the 'rules of the game' that they operate within carry important consequences for the people at large. With elections around the corner, the time is right to think deeply about corrective measures.¹



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